

Intestinal Parasites of Pet Dogs and Cats

The most common parasites of pets live in the gastrointestinal tract. These parasites are important to the health of your pets and to their owners as well. They are so important that intestinal parasites of pets are considered to be a public health issue by the medical profession.

There are three main categories of intestinal parasites. Roundworms are the most common worms seen in very young animals. In dogs, the puppies can even become infested with these worms when they nurse if the mother dog wasn't properly treated to prevent roundworms before and during her pregnancy. The most common source of infection is the fecal-oral route. The pathway to infestation is the ingestion of the eggs of the worms in feces of infected animals. Since the eggs are in the feces, they are everywhere in the environment where dogs and cats have defecated. Hookworms and whipworms belong to the same category of worms, and they also transmit from one animal to another, including humans, via the fecal-oral route. The adults are rarely seen in the feces, but they look like slender white earthworms when they do appear.

Tapeworms are flat segmented worms whose eggs also exit to the environment in the feces. The head produces segments containing microscopic eggs. The segments are large enough to see in fresh feces. They look like a piece of flat pasta and are about the size of a match head. They can move and change shape. Dried segments may be found on and around the anus on careful inspection. They look like tiny grains of white or tan rice. The eggs are microscopic. Both you and your pet can get tapeworms from ingesting a flea that is infested with the tapeworm larvae. Pets can also get tapeworms from small animals that they catch and eat.

The next category consists of the protozoal intestinal parasites, giardia and coccidiosis. These are microscopic organisms that live in the intestinal tract and are passed in the feces. Infestation is again via the fecal-oral route.

All these parasites pose risks to humans who can become infected from contact with animal feces and soil and water that have been contaminated with feces. Pets who are affected can have diarrhea, malnourishment, vomiting, and blood in the feces, slow development, a swollen abdomen and other problems.

Intestinal Parasites of Pets-What You Can Do

The best thing for your pet is to never get a parasitic infestation in the first place. But this is uncommon because the parasites are everywhere in the environment and few breeders treat the parents or the puppies and kittens appropriately. So almost all puppies and kittens have intestinal parasites at an early age. If you are acquiring a new puppy or kitten, you should have a fecal test for intestinal parasites before you take the pet into your home.

Your pet's lifestyle is a factor in his or her risk of acquiring a parasitic infestation. Animals that spend time outdoors, that hunt, kill and eat prey, and those that come in contact with the feces of other animals have a higher risk. Contaminated water and soil are other potential sources. Humans are at risk directly from their pets and from soil and water contaminated with feces. The number one thing you can do to protect yourself is to wash your hands thoroughly after gardening and handling your pets

All cats and dogs should have a fecal exam every year to determine if parasites are present. Once identified, they can be treated very successfully. Roundworm, hookworm and whipworm prevention is easily managed with the same monthly products used to prevent heartworm disease. Keeping your pets free of fleas can prevent tapeworms. Managing your pet's environment can prevent giardia and coccidiosis.

If your pet tests positive for a parasite, your veterinarian will discuss treatment, control and prevention strategies to protect both you and your pets. Before bringing home a new pet, you should have this discussion with your veterinarian to help you test and treat your new pet for intestinal parasites before your home, yard, current pets and possibly your family members acquire a parasitic infestation.

Puppies and kittens have the highest risk of having intestinal parasites, and children are the people most at risk for becoming infected.